THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT GIFT

DECEMBER 20, 1998
John M. Buchanan

"Dear Maria:

I think we're going to have an exceptionally good Christmas. The very fact that outward circumstance precludes our making provision for it will show whether we can be content with what is truly essential. I used to be very fond of thinking up and buying presents, but now that we have nothing to give, the gift God gave us in the birth of Christ will seem all the more glorious; the emptier our hands, the better we understand.... The poorer our quarters, the more clearly we perceive that our hearts should be Christ's home on earth. So let us approach this Christmas-tide not only undaunted but with complete confidence."

Dietrick Bonhoeffer
Love Letters From Cell 92

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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THE SEARCH FOR THE PERFECT GIFT
DECEMBER 20, 1998
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
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SCRIPTURE
Matthew 2:1-11
"...and they knelt down and paid him homage...they offered him gifts..." Matthew 2:11 (NRSV)

Dear God, in these quiet moments in the midst of the noise and frenzy of our Christmas preparation; in the midst of national and international events of unprecedented importance and tragedy, come to us. Startle us once again with the old story. Help us to hear it in the days ahead as if for the first time. Silence in us any voice but your own, that we may hear once again the singing of angels, a baby's cry, and your eternal, life giving word. Amen.

They came from the east, from Persia. They were Magi, mystics, wise astrologers who observed the movements of the stars. And when they mysteriously appeared in Bethlehem, miles and miles from their homes, observed the new born, his mother and father, the unusual setting, they did a most extraordinary thing - they knelt and paid him homage. Then they opened the treasure chests they had brought along and they gave him gifts, perfect gifts, extravagant gifts, unique gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. And ever since, to wise and foolish, rich and poor, believer and non-believer, it has seemed that the giving of gifts is the very essence of Christmas.

We are heavily invested in this, literally. The responsibility weighs heavily upon us: to make lists of recipients, to identify the appropriate gift, to enter the retail market out there with all that entails, fight the crowds, wait in line, purchase the gift, wrap the gift, present the gift. We are heavily invested, some would suggest, over-invested.

So huge is this enterprise that the Nieman Marcus Christmas gift catalog itself is a volume of such heft that it costs $10. The *New York Times* this morning featured an article, "The Card-Carrying Angst of the Dysfunctional Shopper," and referred to "Shopping Disorder... when people spend more than they should for reasons they shouldn't." The article said there are psychiatrists who specialize in treating shopping disorder, mostly in Manhattan, I guess.

When it comes to children our investment becomes even more substantial. One survey suggests that American families will spend $365 per child this year, no surprise to anyone who has seen lines of shoppers waiting to get into FAO Schwartz. It was a sad day in our lives when our grandchildren finally realized that FAO was a store and not an inter-active toy museum where their grandparents took them to play for an hour or so.

The Sunday *Times* editorial section last week featured a piece relevant to our text "With So Many Toys, There's Angst in Toyland."

> "Half crazed, shrieking children rip into present after present, tossing toys left, right and up in the air. Suddenly they are done. Some are still wide-eyed, but some are

dazed as they stare at their seasonal loot. Soon, all are playing merrily with the empty boxes as if they are the best toys of all."

The article suggested that "America's children are being buried in an avalanche of toys and that child psychologists fear that children are being simultaneously over-stimulated and desensitized by a deluge of misguided love. Too many gifts can effect a child's emerging sense of self-worth - what children want and need is a genuine sense of caring."

Attentive grandparents that we are, we sent the article to the parents of our grandchildren, who told us the following: Driving home from school they had launched into an extended conversation with our three: 11 - 8 - 5. They explained that we give gifts because God gave us Jesus and, believe it or not, the older you get the more you enjoy giving gifts. You enjoy giving gifts as much, sometimes more, than receiving them; to which our very wise 11 year old Caitlin said, "I don't half believe that!"

We are invested in this enterprise. I was walking through Water Tower Place last week following a woman and her son, about six or seven. She was carrying two huge shopping bags. She seemed weary. Suddenly her son bolted in the direction of The Sharper Image, an upscale store. "Bobby" she called, "don't go there." Bobby persisted and his mother raised her voice, "Bobby come back!" Now, heads were turning and all eyes were on Bobby who was now clearly going to reach his destination. Exasperated, stressed out and no doubt exhausted, his mother now yelled in a voice heard all over the second floor glass elevator lobby: "Bobby! Stop. We've been in that damned store six times already!" Now, I was hooked. I couldn't help myself. I had to see the object of Bobby's quest. When I caught up with him he was relaxing in a large leather recliner enjoying a foot massage.

Bill McKibben, an author and a Methodist layman who writes important books on environmental issues (*The End of Nature*) tried to start a movement called Hundred Dollar Holiday, whose purpose is to promote setting some reasonable monetary limits on gift purchasing. McKibben, in his research and interviews, concludes that we feel cheated sometimes in this season that is supposed to bring us joy and peace and love. The story of the birth and the baby who became our savior, a story that should be full of giddy joy, can hardly make it to our hearts because of all the rush and fuss of the season. In the process of traveling and talking about the Hundred Dollar Holiday McKibben discovered a deep longing in most hearts for more than what Christmas produces. People are willing to talk about limits, but what many, maybe most of us, are feeling, is that "Christmas is something to endure as least as much as it is to enjoy. Instead of an island of peace amid a busy life, it is an island of bustle. The people we were talking to wanted so much more out of Christmas: more music, more companionship, more contemplation, more time out of doors, more love." (*The Christian Century*, 12/2/98, "Who Stole Christmas?") And I realized that if that is what we want, everything we do in this season stands in the way of any of it happening.

Learning to give, finding the perfect gift, is no simple task. Perhaps the most famous giver of Christmas gifts of all, next to Santa Claus himself, is a Charles Dickens character by the name of Ebeneezer Scrooge. Tight fisted, selfish beyond description, locked into his own miserable little world, Scrooge is a memorable metaphor for the human condition. His conversion, you will recall, is neither quick nor easy. He doesn't even see the humanness

of the people around him, doesn't seem to care about the poignant struggles of his clerk, Bob Cratchit at all, until his dreams of Christmas past, present and future. Theologian Douglas Ottati, in a new book, discusses Scrooge's experience in terms of "the mysticism without which people become less than truly human ... the sensibility without which passion falters." The enlarging of Scrooge's heart, Ottati observes, "depends on his being blessed with the right nightmares." (*Hopeful Realism*, p. 41)

It's only when he confronts the reality of his mortality, the brevity of his life, that Scrooge begins to understand the blessing, the grace and gift of life. And then, his heart opens and he laughs and he becomes a gift giver extraordinary.

So the task of finding the perfect gift means first of all knowing that the lease on the project that is your life and mine doesn't go on for ever. There will come a time when we will not be able to give gifts anymore. It means knowing that and then identifying what we have to give and then, like the Magi, opening our treasure chests and giving it.

The best gifts of all always contain within them something of the giver. Do a little accounting today, the best Christmas gifts you ever received. My guess is that it was not merely the size or monetary value of the gift, it was the surprise, which means the infinite care that the giver took. And my guess is that what makes a gift memorable still is the thought, the memory, of your parents, your beloved, your children, thinking about it, planning it, buying it for you or making it.

It really isn't monetary at all. Across the years my favorite gifts are plaster of paris hand prints, popsicle-stick pencil holders, a pair of ice skates no one in the world would have thought I might love. I look and smile every day at a book mark, plasticized with stick figures and a 7 year-old's drawings on it. I love Kathye's salted pecans, and Morgan's fudge and Ted's pickles and Ruthie's reindeer cookies. Children know it too. More is not better. Not only do toddlers seem to prefer the boxes and paper and ribbon to the toys, little ones want to hear the same favorite story book read, over and over, until they have memorized every word and can catch an unsuspecting parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle who is impatient to get to the end and decides to skip a page, paragraph or sentence. Little ones know something important when they attach themselves to the same rag doll, worn and frayed, and drag it along behind, instead of new, better and bigger and more expensive replacements.

Author Anne Lamott, who will be here at Fourth Church for International Women's Day on March 1, 1999, has written a great book on writing and living and suggests that the key to both is giving; giving from somewhere deep in your heart. You must find what you have to give. "We each have something to give, a song to sing. Maybe it won't be a song exactly but maybe just a little tune, a calliope tune, the tune of survival." And she offers the best story of giving she ever heard:

> "An eight-year-old boy had a younger sister who was dying of leukemia and he was told that without a blood transfusion she would die. His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers - and that he could be the donor. They asked him if they could test his blood. He said sure. So they did and it was a

> good match. They asked if he would give his sister a pint of blood, that it could be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight.
>
> The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the blood. So they took him to the hospital where he was put on a gurney beside his six-year-old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IV's. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then put in the girl's IV. The boy lay on the gurney in silence while the blood dripped into his sister, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. Then the boy opened his eyes and asked: 'How soon until I start to die?'" (*Bird by Bird* p. 205)

Sometimes, Lamott says, you have to be that innocent.

It is the secret to survival. It is the way to live, to be, to become, to rejoice, to be happy, to laugh, to be blessed ... to know how to give.

No one ever said that more beautifully than C. S. Lewis:

> "To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements, lock it safe in the casket or coffin in your own selfishness. But in that casket - safe, dark, motionless, airless - it will change. It will not be broken: it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." (*The Four Loves*, p. 111)

Something like the reverse of that is what happened in the Bethlehem stable when the mysterious visitors from the East arrived and saw the child, the love of God, and knelt down and did something I think may have been spontaneous and unplanned, opened their treasure chests and gave what they had.

Something like that will happen to you and me, pray God, in the next few days, as we give and receive the gifts of the season.

And something like that will happen to you and me as the gift of God's love is given once again, and our spirits and hearts are moved.

> "What can I give Him
> poor as I am?
> What I can, I give Him,
> Give my heart."

Amen.